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Visions of Apes, Reflections on Change: Telling Tales of Great Apes in Equatorial Africa

Tamara Giles-Vernick and Stephanie Rupp

Abstract: This article explores stories that some central Africans in the middle Sangha River basin and in northern Gabon have told about gorillas and chimpanzees. Such tales have provided opportunities for Africans to debate the consequences of their engagements with outside people, resources, and processes. But their meanings have proliferated in different social, cultural, and historical contexts. Central Africans have used such stories to make claims about access to and control over human productive and reproductive labor, forest resources and spaces, and other forms of wealth; racial and ethnic relations; and human existence and death. These stories provide critical insights into the reasons people hunt or protect great apes, and they illuminate the complex social and political tensions generated by conservation interventions. Great ape tales thus offer conservationists insights into the challenges and promise of managing an important game population, as well as the potential social consequences of their interventions.

Résumé: Cet article explore des récits racontés par des africains dans le bassin du milieu de la rivière Sangha et dans le Gabon du nord sur les gorilles et les chimpanzés. Ces types de récits ont permit aux africains de débattre des questions de leur contact avec des populations, des ressources et des modes de fonctionnement venant de l'extérieur. Cependant, les significations de ces récits se sont disséminés

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dans différents contextes sociaux, culturels et historiques. Les africains du centre ont utilisé ces récits pour renforcer leurs vision de l'accés et du contrôle de la production et reproduction humaines, des resources et espaces forestiers, d'autres formes de richesse, des relations ethniques et raciales, de la vie et de la mort. Ces histoires fournissent des aperçus significatifs sur les raisons pour lesquelles les gens chassent ou protègent les grands singes, et elles mettent en lumière les tensions complexes sociales et politiques générées par les initiatives de conservation. Les récits sur les grands singes offrent ainsi des vues conservatrices sur les défis et les promesses de la gestion d'une population importante de gibier, en même temps que sur les conséquences sociales possibles de leurs propres initiatives.

> You know, the Baka say that if a Baka dies, he transforms himself into a white person. And if a Bangando dies, he transforms himself into a gorilla.
>
> (Bangando man, Cameroon)

> Apes share something of our human mental world.... Apes have a legitimate mental existence.... They have perhaps a mind and even possibly a consciousness not so very different from ours.
>
> (Dale Peterson, *Eating Apes*)

The boundary between people and apes is indistinct. Whether in Western contexts of conservation biology and activism or in central African contexts of village life, people and apes are understood to be fundamentally different kinds of beings, even as the unavoidable commonalities among these primates are recognized and debated. Indeed, social commentary on the relationships between people and apes can reveal core values that not only demarcate boundaries between culture and nature, but also highlight social boundaries and differences between human selves and others, between haves and have-nots, and between the exploited and the powerful. Western conservation discourse, as exemplified by the comment above by Peterson, aims to evoke empathic sentiments in the Western public whose ethical barometers are gauged to measure the noble plight of nonhuman, and thus inherently innocent, victims. Yet from their value-laden yet geographically and culturally distant perspective, Western audiences rarely consider the meanings that central Africans, who live in close proximity to great apes, attribute to them.

This article begins an exploration of central African narratives about relationships between people and apes. While these stories take on different meanings over time and space, we suggest that it is through such ape tales that Africans past and present have depicted and debated social differences, social tensions, and relations between self and other. In particu-

lar, narratives that center on relations between people and apes highlight the nature of central Africans' engagements with external processes, resources, and people. Through such stories, central African forest-dwellers make claims about control over human productive and reproductive labor; access to forest resources, spaces, and wealth; racial and ethnic relations; and the boundary between life and death.[1]

The published literature on people and great apes in central Africa is almost entirely dominated by primatologists, ecologists, and conservationists most concerned with the ecology and behavior of great apes and the threats that human encroachment and hunting pose to their existence.[2] Social scientists and conservationists have missed an opportunity to examine the variable ways in which central Africans conceive of the great apes whom they encounter, hunt, avoid, and discuss.[3] Yet such insights on relations between people and apes illuminate a wealth of symbolic meanings concerning these much-storied primates, even as they provide critical perspectives on international efforts to protect them.

Our concern with great apes derives as much from the many stories that central Africans have told us about them as it does from Western obsessions with nonhuman primates. Any social scientific exploration of human–ape relations must grapple with Donna Haraway's seminal work, *Primate Visions*, which queries how "love, power, and science intertwined in the constructions of nature" (1989:1). For Westerners, Haraway argues, monkeys and apes "have a privileged relation to nature and culture" because they occupy the interstices of nature and culture, the antipodal forces that shape the Western social imagination, and their "material and symbolic threads interweave in the fabric of late twentieth-century nature for industrial people" (1989:1). She demonstrates that the Western pursuits and academic disciplines that bring people and primates together under the common umbrella of the Primate Order are "deeply enmeshed in narrative, politics, myth, economics, and technical possibilities," and she finds people and their nonhuman fellow primates entangled in "cultures of contention" (1989:2). Primate studies have been embedded in Western historical visions as part of a broader set of extractive colonial relations, as a counter to the "ills of civilization," and as a platform on which to study, imagine, and implement idealized Western notions of the balance between nature and culture. And yet, despite Haraway's and other scholars' analyses regarding the place of apes and monkeys in the Euroamerican imagination, many researchers have neglected to consider the significance of nonhuman primates in the histories, experiences, and imaginations of the very people who encounter them on a regular basis.

Haraway's insights into the crucial roles that primates play in the imaginations of Westerners sparked our own inquiries into how our central African informants have used them as tools or "windows" into thinking about their relations with one another and with other living beings.[4] Working in different parts of central Africa's Sangha River basin forest as a his-

torian in the Central African Republic and an anthropologist in Cameroon, we were struck during our field research by the colorful and symbolically potent stories that equatorial Africans recounted about apes and how these stories effectively blurred the lines between people and animals and between the living and the dead. Africans have told great ape tales in wide-ranging historical and contemporary contexts and have put these tales to different uses, but generally they have sought to underscore differences between self and other. This article explores two kinds of stories in particular—of person–ape transformations, and of individual humans' reincarnation as gorillas—in southwestern Central African Republic, southeastern Cameroon, and neighboring northern Gabon. In tracing the stories' diverse meanings in different sociocultural and temporal contexts, this article suggests implications for Western conservationists' efforts to protect game (including great apes) from hunting pressures.

Apes and Evidence

The great apes addressed in this article are western lowland gorillas (*Gorilla gorilla gorilla*) and chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*). Lowland gorillas range in the forests covering Cameroon, Gabon, the Republic of Congo, and the Central African Republic (CAR). Chimpanzees are more widely distributed from the upper Guinea forests in West Africa through the Congo basin forest to the eastern shore of Lake Tanganyika (Haltenorth & Diller 1980:301, 304). Both apes are primarily forest dwellers. Lowland gorillas prefer to live, feed, and sleep in primary and mixed forests, light gaps, and salines, rather than in areas of regular human activity, particularly avoiding roads, paths, and areas frequented by hunters (Remis 1999:61–63). Nevertheless, the past and present livelihoods of humans and great apes have been deeply intertwined, often in liminal regions of tropical forests such as disturbed forests, gardens, and along some forest paths where the domains of people and apes overlap. [5] Over one hundred years ago, Henry Morton Stanley (whose works were certainly replete with fantasies) wrote of chimpanzees who stole and played a drum, pilfered fruit from plantations, and (in a claim that strains all credulity) used torches to light their way (Stanley 1900:I, 449). On many occasions, our informants described encounters with gorillas and chimpanzees' stealing food from their forest-edge gardens. Others recounted finding gorillas in their snare traps or deliberately hunting gorillas and chimpanzees for their meat. Hence, it bears emphasizing that great apes have not only an important symbolic presence but also an important material presence as actors who can impinge on human livelihoods and as hunted game in the forests of southwestern CAR and southeastern Cameroon.

In referring to the "great apes" as a category, we acknowledge that we are imposing a Western classificatory taxonomy on central Africans'

accounts of gorillas and chimpanzees. Having come to explore relations between people and apes by accident, neither of us specifically sought to elucidate the categories by which Mpiemu (of the middle and upper Sangha basin of the Central African Republic) and Bangando (of southeastern Cameroon) classify animal groups. Furthermore, the secondary literature on people–ape relations does not consistently discuss local categories for classifying animals. Mpiemu speakers do have specific names, of course, for the great apes with whom they come into contact: gorilla (*ntchilo*) and chimpanzee (*wago*) (the root of the latter [*wag-*] also signifies "to bother"). They also contend that gorillas and chimpanzees share similar origins with people, although apes display different behavior from people in that they do not live in villages or "listen to the word of Ntchambe," their supreme deity. Bangando of southeastern Cameroon do, however, have distinct appellations for animal categories, dividing animals into groups according to observed ecological behavior, and they also attribute emotional characteristics to these animals. For example, in historical narratives of Bangando wars and migrations, various groups of animals offer strategic information about the location of enemies and where people should flee, categories of information and methods of escape that are linked to each animal's observed behavior. According to oral histories, in the nineteenth century, the *dáwá* (the broad family of monkeys, chimps, and gorillas) rescued a segment of the Bangando population from abduction and death at the hands of Ndzimou peoples who lived in a northwesterly section of the forest. The dáwá stood guard over the forest at the tops of the trees and called out warnings to Bangando people as the Ndzimou approached, preparing their attack. The dáwá then led the Bangando through the forest, nimbly navigating the canopy of trees and finding the quickest paths and best hiding places for the fleeing Bangando. In gratitude, this segment of the Bangando community adopted monkeys and apes as their clan totem, and to this day they refrain from eating the meat of chimpanzees, gorillas, and monkeys. This story of mutual protection, we will argue, is part of an ethic that Bangando seek to inculcate and sustain among younger generations and has important implications for Bangando perceptions of threats to forest game populations.

This article relies upon oral and written accounts of people's encounters with gorillas and chimpanzees in central Africa over the past century and a half, drawing on explorers' accounts, oral histories, and contemporary ethnographic accounts, as well as secondary historical and anthropological literature. While the sources of stories about apes and people vary in their origins and critical perspectives, these diverse renderings consistently highlight the complex negotiation of social boundaries between self and other and between categories of people.

Much of the early historical material comes from the southern forest, primarily in Gabon, where several European and American explorations took place. Nineteenth-century explorers (and novelists) wrote of their

adventures hunting gorillas, playing upon readers' fascination with "that man monkey, that we've been hearing so much of for some years back... a very unnatural monster" (Ballantyne 1845:14–15). As Jennifer Dickenson (2000) has pointed out, European exploratory accounts are permeated with "gothic tropes—boundary transgressions, dark doubles, haunting pasts, and threats of regression—in order to play upon Victorian anxieties about the origins of man" in the aftermath of the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species.* These writings reveal much about how European outsiders perceived relations between Africans and apes and provide disturbing insights into their questions about whether Africans were truly human.

Hence, it might be easy for readers to dismiss Euroamerican writings about Africans' conceptions of gorillas and chimpanzees as simply the anxieties and fantasies of racist outsiders, who exaggerated or even fabricated what they saw and heard to gain authority as experts and to sell books.[6] But there are other ways of reading such sources—or rather, reading *through* these sources—to identify equatorial Africans' notions about chimpanzees and gorillas.[7] Outsiders' stories about ape abductions and gorilla reincarnations in the nineteenth century bear a striking resemblance to our contemporary ethnographic evidence and recent ethnographies. We suggest that although explorers' sources certainly reflect the anxieties of racist Westerners, they may also reveal insights into the ways in which past Africans perceived great apes.

Hunters and the Hunted

The first set of stories addresses how in the context of hunting, people and apes share particular characteristics and practices, and thus these stories challenge the distinction between people and animals, the hunters and the hunted. In some of these stories, people and apes reverse their positions, so that people act like apes and apes assume the features of persons. These stories of role reversals differ in the meanings they have acquired in their historical, social, and cultural contexts, but they also reveal tellers' common concerns about rights of access to, and appropriation of, human labor and natural resources.

For some central Africans in the upper and middle Sangha basin, the stories of appropriated behavior and role reversals in the past and present have their roots in a shared history of apes and human beings.[8] For example, across the Sangha River from Mpiemu settlements, in the forests of southern Cameroon, early-twentieth-century Beti and Bulu peoples asserted that human beings and gorillas once lived in intimate contact with one another; they shared kin ties and domestic spaces, as well as obligations and rights. But hostility erupted between people and gorillas when the maternal uncle of a gorilla with a human mother killed an elephant. As the nephew of the hunter, the gorilla had rights to the elephant's head, but

on his way to claiming it, the gorilla slept with one of his uncle's wives.[9] Whereupon the uncle, hearing of the gorilla's act, refused to give him the elephant head, exclaiming, "You should have chosen one or the other of these privileges, but I refuse to cede both to you!" (Laburthe-Tolra 1981:427). The gorilla's crime was his voracious appetite; claiming both the elephant meat and access to the wife represented an overstepping of his social and moral entitlement and thus relegated him to the periphery of the social world.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both central Africans and European explorers told stories about hunting apes, a practice that generated accounts of shared features and social role reversals. From at least the mid-nineteenth century, hunter-specialists stalked and felled great apes with spears and guns and then butchered and divided the meat among kin and followers. According to explorers' accounts of forest-dwelling hunters in Gabon and elsewhere, they succeeded not only by virtue of their strength and intelligence, but also by appropriating the behavior of the apes themselves either before or during the hunt.[10] In the 1860s, Winwood Reade, for instance, contended that some Africans living in Gabon performed a "gorilla dance," imitating the gestures and behaviors of gorillas when they are threatened or attacked (1864:164–67). Paul du Chaillu, in a collection of children's stories based on his experiences in northern Gabon, wrote of hunters imitating the calls of gorillas to lure one to his death (1900:154).[11] Another explorer of equatorial African forests, Mary Kingsley, offered an elaborate description of her tracker's abilities to communicate with the apes:

> I heard Wiki make a peculiar small sound, and looking at him saw his face was working in an awful way as he clutched his throat with his hand violently.... He rolled his head to and fro, and then buried his face into a heap of dried rubbish at the foot of the plantain stem, clasped his hands over it, and gave an explosive sneeze. The gorillas let go all, raised themselves up for a second, gave a quaint sound between a bark and a howl, and then the ladies and the young gentlemen started home. ([1897] 1965:268)

Kingsley's narrative underscores how Wiki the hunter became a gorilla and how Kingsley, in turn, imagined the gorillas as "ladies" and "young gentlemen." But neither Wiki's actions nor the role reversals were practices unique to Mary Kingsley's time. Indeed, Wiki was engaging in a practice that we have witnessed ourselves in the northern forest, where hunters and trackers lure gorillas toward their death by imitating their calls.[12]

But just as people could hunt gorillas and chimps, so too could apes hunt people, at least in stories that central Africans told. Upending assumptions about who is the hunter and who is the hunted, these stories recount how chimpanzees and gorillas express their rapacious appetites for

men and women by abducting them. Paul du Chaillu, who conducted several gorilla hunts in the 1850s in the Monts de Cristal of northern Gabon, reported "curious stories" told by Africans about gorilla abductions, including one in which an "immense gorilla" carried off an African woman and "forced her to submit to his desires."[13] Men, it seems, were also prey, but were subjected to different treatment. In another account, gorillas were harvesting and bundling sugar cane when a group of villagers appeared and tried to drive them away. The gorillas fought back and abducted some of their human attackers, only to release them days later with their fingernails and toenails torn off. Still other men were reportedly killed by a gorilla hiding in the lower branches of a tree who reached down to grab a passing man "with his powerful feet and [drew] him up into the tree, where he quietly choke[d] him" (du Chaillu [1861] 1969:87–88; see also du Chaillu 1900:145, 148–49).

Reade, though highly critical of du Chaillu, wrote of similar abduction stories recounted by central Africans. In addition to the frequent narratives of great apes pursuing and abducting women, one notable tale from Cabinda recounts the story of a man who shoots and wounds a female chimp found grazing in his wife's maize field (Monboddo, quoted in Reade 1864:173-4, 184). The "husband" of the chimp pursues the man to his house, forcibly enters, and drags him off, as the human wife screams that a "white-faced old man" has abducted her husband. The neighbors then pursue and kill the chimp in order to release the human captive. But just as the chimpanzee had become a "white faced old man" to the woman, the husband thereafter is ridiculed with the name of Chimpenza; in his position as prey, he has become a chimpanzee in the eyes of his neighbors.[14]

It would be easy to dismiss these stories of ape–human role reversals as nineteenth-century Euroamericans' fantasies about Africans, except for the fact that we have heard many similar stories of abductions and sexual transgressions from contemporary central Africans who, in all likelihood, did not have access to writings of or discussions offered by Reade, du Chaillu, and Kingsley. The meanings of these abductions and sexual transgressions have, of course, changed over time. But in terms of their function they may always have provided the narrators and listeners with an opportunity to debate "the extractions and invasions" (see White 2000:5) with which central Africans in northern Gabon have had to contend. Certainly nineteenth-century Africans living on the western rim of the Congo River basin (in regions that du Chaillu, Reade, and Kingsley also visited) engaged in intense conflict over access to and control over other people. The competition for wives, dependents, and slaves in the latter half of the century—along with the fear, uncertainty, and upheaval it sparked—occurred in large part because of an explosion in long- and short-distance trade with Europeans that included both people and natural commodities.[15] Even as the Atlantic slave trade was declining in the late 1850s and early 1860s as France and Britain sought to end it, the French still allowed one company

to "recruit" indentured servants for West Indies plantations. Slave exports to the Americas declined in the 1850s but increased again in the 1860s and 1870s. And raiding for domestic enslavement seems to have persisted for decades thereafter, as European demand for rubber, ebony, and ivory expanded considerably (Gaulme 1988:95; Gray 2002:35; M'Bokolo 1981:21).

Thus the stories heard by du Chaillu, Reade, and Kingsley of gorilla and chimpanzee abductions may well have been connected to the "snatching," enslavement, and forced recruitment that humans committed against humans. Certainly the parallels between the two forms of abduction are striking, both of them motivated by a voracious appetite for human beings, their labor, and the products of their labor. The similarities between ape aggression and struggles over labor suggest, therefore, that ape stories expressed the very real anxieties that Africans suffered. Reade, in fact, mentions that he gained some of his information about gorillas from slaves who worked as hunters (1864:164). To be sure, these speculative interpretations require additional historical research in various localities where people recounted these stories. Relevant questions might include, for instance, how beliefs about ape abductions shaped men's and women's practices (including those of self-protection) when they moved through the forest, how people thought of enslavement and forced conscription, and what messages they conveyed or advantages they earned by depicting their competitors for labor as apes.

Today, gorilla hunting occurs regularly in the middle Sangha basin forests, and stories of gorilla attacks are common among Bangando, Baka, Mpiemu, and Aka hunters.[16] While the sources are not available for us to trace stories of ape–human role reversals during colonial rule, we have found that some equatorial Africans continue to tell stories of ape abductions, or at least did so into the late twentieth century. The contemporary tales that we have collected reflect current debates over social differences and relations among diverse categories of people, and their competing claims to natural resources, material wealth, and development assistance. For example, during the 1990s, when the Central African Republic (in conjunction with Euroamerican conservation organizations such as the World Wide Fund for Nature [WWF]) sought to protect gorillas, chimpanzees, and other game, increased conflict over access to the forest was expressed in Mpiemu narratives about increasingly aggressive gorilla behavior. Mpiemu speakers and other forest inhabitants discussed the gorillas' humanlike behavior, such as their propensity for threatening and carrying off women. Menstruating women could not enter the forest in part because of their vulnerability to gorillas, and other women warded them off by carrying the *ngwago* flower (whose name has the same root as the Mpiemu word for "chimpanzee" [*wago*] and thus also has the connotation of menace). But while women once were forbidden from eating gorilla meat, men and women interviewed in 1993 contended that they were now permitted

to consume it because gorillas "menaced" women even more than they had decades ago, suggesting that to them this consumption represented reasonable retribution.[17]

It is impossible to determine whether in the 1990s gorillas actually did threaten people in the forest more than they had previously, although logging and increasing population influxes may have put people in contact with apes more frequently than in the past. It is also possible that people perceived apes as posing an increasing threat because of limits that a state- and WWF-sponsored conservation project placed on human movement within the forest, uses of forest resources, and on gorilla and chimpanzee hunting. In 1990 the CAR government acceded to demands of WWF's researchers and established the Dzanga-Ndoki Park: 1,220 square kilometers of forest in which only approved research and tourism are officially permitted. The state also earmarked nearly 3,400 square kilometers of contiguous forest to serve as a buffer zone (called the Dzanga-Sangha Special Reserve) for various uses. Allowing expatriate safari hunting in certain zones, it also permitted hunting with "traditional" weapons (nets, crossbows, and spears) and registered guns, as well as food and medicinal plant gathering, fishing, and farming (in designated areas). In addition to the many constraints it placed on forest exploitation, the state forbade the hunting of gorillas and chimpanzees. The WWF project was responsible for managing the park and reserve, and as part of its many responsibilities it enforced state laws governing forest and resource use, particularly because the CAR has remained unable or unwilling to shoulder much of the cost of forest and game protection.[18] In this context, many people living near the reserve were especially resentful of the protections offered to great apes. As one elderly trapper complained, "I have grown thin because of the work of the [conservation] project in our forest. I have gone into the forest to look for food, to eat meat. But the [anti-poaching] guards are brutal. They won't let you pick *koko* [*Gnetum africanum*] leaves, because that's food for gorillas" (Giles-Vernick 2002:189). Indeed, to people living in this Sangha forest, these protections effectively sanction the role reversals of people and apes; regulations safeguarding great apes leave human beings hungry and privilege the well-being of apes over that of people. Regardless of gorillas' and chimpanzees' actual behavior in the past decade, it may be that they have been perceived as increasingly aggressive toward women because of the state-sanctioned and WWF-enforced protection of apes' well-being over people's livelihoods.

Across the border in the southeastern corner of Cameroon, stories of ape–human reversals also illuminate the interconnection between human and ape well-being but differ in emphasis and in moral overtones. Stories of relations between human hunters and ape prey highlight the ethical links between Bangando men's responsibilities to elders and kin, their emotional and ethical relationships to the forest and its game, and ultimately the long-term reproduction and protection of game. For young

Bangando girls and boys, as for Mpiemu boys, learning to trap and hunt involves more than simple instruction in how to find food in the forest. Embedded within the hunt are lessons about balancing the intersecting and competing responsibilities that Bangando men have for their families. But in this complex calculus of negotiating diverse and sometimes conflicting responsibilities, Bangando youth must also learn to limit their hunting and trapping to conserve animals and other resources of the forest for future generations. Bangando adults—men and women, old and young—commonly recount stories of learning to set traps and kill game, following their fathers and uncles in the forest. In discussions about their experiences hunting and trapping, one common theme is the intense feelings of pity and remorse that Bangando boys (and girls) feel at finding a chimpanzee caught in their snare and then being exhorted by fathers and uncles to kill it. One Bangando historical migration narrative, recounted in the late 1990s, is particularly poignant. This narrative tells of the first rainy season that Ndjàmbé and his family, the mythical Bangando ancestors, spent in the forest, and it describes their difficulties in finding food and surviving.[19]

> Ndjàmbé lived with his two wives and three sons in the forest, where they farmed and hunted. Each day, Ndjàmbé's three sons took turns checking their father's traps to bring back meat. One day, when the youngest son checked the traps, he found two animals. He killed the first animal. As he went to kill the second, a chimpanzee, it cried out, "Spare me! Spare me, my child! If you let me go, whenever you run into trouble, call my name, Tika Tika!" So the youngest son let the chimpanzee go free. He worried, however, that his father would be angry if he returned home with only one animal from the traps. And sure enough, Ndjàmbé was very angry indeed.
>
> Ndjàmbé's wives had just planted their garden when a great famine came to the land. Because the crops were still growing, the family had no food to eat. So the family went farther into the forest to survive on wild yams and honey. In the forest they found a Leko tree that had honey on every branch.[20] The whole family scaled the tree, lashing ladders to climb from branch to branch. As they ascended the tree they ate its honey, cutting off each branch after consuming its store. They built sleeping platforms in the tree and spent many weeks there.
>
> When the family finished off the honey, they wanted to return home to eat their ripening crops in their garden. But they could not descend the tree: They had lopped off its branches, and the ladders had rotted. Ndjàmbé told his wives and sons that they should shout out for help, taking turns each day. The two wives and the eldest two sons called out for help, but to no avail. Then the youngest son shouted for help. He called "Tika Tika!" He called again. And once more, "Tika Tika tinka mbaï!" ["Tika Tika, help me, friend!"]
>
> A small figure emerged from the forest. It was Tika Tika, the chimpanzee whose life the youngest son had spared. Tika Tika rescued the family, carrying them one by one on his back to the ground. The family

> returned happily to the village, finding that the garden had produced a good harvest. Everyone ate well; the famine was over. Ndjàmbé made his youngest son the chief of the family, for the son had saved his parents and siblings from famine in the tree. And to this day the chimpanzee is the closest animal friend of the Bangando, closer than the gorillas or the monkeys. They are the smallest sons of the Bangando. The moral of the story is "Help me; I will help you one day" [Gbàdè mí; mì bò gbàdè mé swèè].[21]

This tale problematizes the distinction between human and ape by questioning which one acts "humanely."[22] Ndjàmbé seems far from the ideal father figure, much less the mythological, apical ancestor or deity of the Bangando. Instead, he is incompetent and irresponsible, as he bumbles about in the forest, unable to feed his family and forcing them to live in the tree like chimpanzees. The chimpanzee Tika Tika acts more intelligently, responsibly, and compassionately—although interestingly, the son does as well and is presented as entirely justified in flouting the authority of the father. In ignoring his father's instructions, the son also begins to build an important symbiotic relationship between chimpanzees and Bangando, a relationship whose importance to the Bangando is underscored in the war stories in which the dáwá rescue the Bangando from certain doom at the hands of attacking enemies. In choosing to spare Tika Tika's life, the son, like Tika Tika himself, embraces and enacts the central tenet of Bangando moral obligation: You help me, and one day I will help you.

But this tale seems to address more than generational relations. Indeed, it constitutes an important commentary on relations among people, chimpanzees, and other forest game, and ultimately on the management of forest resources—a highly politicized topic in the late 1990s in southern Cameroon. The story of Tika Tika both undergirds a set of moral obligations that Bangando hunters have toward chimpanzees and other forest game to extract only as much bushmeat from the forest as they need, and reminds Bangando listeners that they may have abandoned these obligations (see Peterson 2000).

For many, these moral responsibilities were abandoned in the 1990s, when political upheaval and economic hardship, along with a network of extensive logging roads in the region, precipitated the influx of large-scale commercial "poachers" seeking to earn a steady supply of cash.[23] These commercial hunters, who frequently came from elsewhere in Cameroon, followed logging roads deep into the forest and set many hundreds of snares to hunt and sell bushmeat to distant towns and cities. But intensive trapping has had significant ecological costs: by the 1990s, the scale of hunting outpaced the ability of animals to sustain their populations. Bangando as well as Baka and other forest communities noted that meat availability for their own consumption dwindled as forest animals became scarce, and they increasingly felt unable to sustain their own communities. Bangando elders tried unsuccessfully to prevent these outsiders from over-

exploiting the region's game supply, but their efforts to expel them were ineffective. Like Ndjàmbé, Bangando elders could neither fill their families' bellies nor protect and stabilize the animal populations. Young men and women, too, were complicit in the abandonment of these older moral obligations enshrined in the Tika Tika story. As subsistence became increasingly difficult in southeastern Cameroonian forests, they increasingly embraced opportunities to move to logging towns or even distant cities to build their lives and accumulate wealth independently, abandoning their responsibilities to elders and to the broader kin networks and their duty to protect chimpanzees and other mammals of the forest.

Great ape hunting stories have persisted for over a century and a half. They appear to highlight tensions over access to labor, reproduction, and forest resources, and to elucidate distinctions between self and other, insiders and outsiders. At the same time, these tales have been sufficiently flexible to offer a narrative framework within which wide-ranging political, economic, and ecological concerns are addressed, from precolonial trading and slave raiding, to debates over the effects of contemporary conservation efforts, to conflicts over access to and management of game populations.

Apes and Afterlife

A second set of stories about great apes centers on the reincarnation of people as gorillas who roam the forest revisiting places where they once lived as humans. In many tales of apes and afterlife, gorillas occupy an indeterminate space between life and death; people recounting these stories use them to illuminate distinctions between, and social tensions among, diverse social categories of living people.

Like the great ape hunting tales, these stories of humans reincarnated as gorillas have existed for well over a century. Such stories were recounted by du Chaillu, for example, who also reported on a belief among equatorial Africans that some gorillas are inhabited by a dead person's spirit: "Such gorillas, the natives believe, can never be caught or killed; and, also, they have much more shrewdness and sense than the common animal. In fact, in these 'possessed' beasts, it would seem that the intelligence of man is united with the strength and ferocity of the beast ([1861]1969:101). While these stories reveal little about the historical and social contexts in which they were produced, they may fit into a larger body of belief and narrative tradition throughout equatorial Africa regarding the transformation of people into animals of all sorts (leopards, elephants, crocodiles, etc.). However, stories about the transformation of people into gorillas are unique in terms of the commentary they offer on social relations, tensions, and inequalities among living people.

The narrator of a story recounted in the 1990s to one of the authors was an elderly Mpiemu man, Mpeng Patrice, who recalled a time in the

1950s when he had moved from his home village in the northern forest to work on a large coffee plantation, where he earned a salary that he spent on clothing, cooking pots, and other consumer goods. One Sunday morning, as Mpeng and his family harvested peanuts in their field, a small rainstorm interrupted their work. While Mpeng's family huddled under their shelter to avoid the rain, a gust of wind felled a large tree on the field's edge. The tree crashed into the shelter, crushing his seven-year old daughter, Sassio Marie, and killing her. To the grief-stricken Mpeng, Marie's death was no accident. His suspicions were confirmed by a diviner in a town downstream along the Sangha River, who asserted that a distant kinswoman in the plantation village had taken a dislike to Mpeng because of his material successes and had killed his daughter. This death prevented Mpeng and his family from reproducing the vital substance (*alembo*) which, through their descendants, would bind them to past generations, and it destroyed Mpeng's wealth, as embodied in the person of Marie. Later, on frequent occasions Mpeng would witness a gorilla (*ntchilo*) at the very place where his daughter had died and exhibiting very strange behavior. The gorilla would emerge from the forest, sit at the field's edge, and gaze placidly at the elderly man. Mpeng, in turn, would ask, "Are you an animal? Or a person?" The gorilla, Mpeng concluded, was neither a "person" nor an "animal," but rather, a manifestation of his dead daughter.

Mpeng's story of Marie's death and her reappearance as a gorilla, though told in the 1990s, also expressed historical tensions that had permeated the plantation village in the late colonial years, as rivalries to accumulate wealth in people and in consumer goods played themselves out in battles over occult forces. But the liminal (not quite human, not quite animal) body of the gorilla also illustrates the ambiguity of both Mpeng's and Marie's social position: the incompleteness and unrealized potential of a young girl's short life, and Mpeng's stymied effort to reproduce the vital substance of kinship that bound him, as well as Marie, to past generations (Giles-Vernick 2001:205–9; 2002:194–96).

Stories of gorillas as people returned from the dead have also taken on other meanings among equatorial African narrators. Michelle Kisliuk's study of musical life and performance among Aka peoples in the Central African Republic reveals how people invoke such stories to debate categories and concepts of ethnicity and race. One Aka tale, for instance, describes a non-Aka neighbor who dies and whose soul goes into the forest and becomes a gorilla. After tiring of eating forest foods, the gorilla returns to his old village so that he can eat manioc. When he encounters his wife, he grabs her and kisses her on the ear. Later, when soldiers inquire about his transformation, he offers an explanation: "Oh, I died and it was all over. *Bon*, I went and ate the things of the forest; they didn't suit me so I came to stay in the village. My wife makes me manioc." Later, he vows, "*Bon*, I will never leave my food here again" (Kisliuk 1998:205–6). The language and

characters of the tale ridicule the aspirations of villagers seeking greater social mobility. The use of the French on the part of the villager-turned-gorilla suggests a ludicrous attempt to impress soldiers, the quintessential embodiments of a high-modernist, intrusive, and often corrupt state. But more fundamentally, this tale also reveals widely held notions that Aka express about *bilo*, as they call their non-Aka neighbors from several ethnic groups.[24] It pokes fun at bilo who return from death as apes because of their overwhelming hunger for the comforts of women and village life. And bilo women, the tale further suggests, are willing to put up with gorillas as husbands. Indeed, the tale echoes the insults that Aka level at their neighbors, whom they call *soumbou* (chimpanzee) or *ebobo* (gorilla) (Kisliuk 1998:59, 165), although some Aka narrators contend that these insults are only retribution for the insults that bilo hurl at them.

These accusations, at any rate, expressed in idioms of humanity and animality, speak to important tensions among some forest inhabitants about perceived ethnic similarities and differences, and about the ways that ethnic differences can shape access to the wealth and attention of powerful outsiders. Across the border in southeastern Cameroon, Bangando and Baka, who belong to distinct but interdigitated ethnic groups, accuse one another of "sharing the blood of" and "behaving like" great apes and conclude that the differences between them account for differential access to the opportunities and material wealth offered by white outsiders. Thus a Bangando man explained:

> They [the Baka] will say that Bangando are gorillas, even though we share the same blood. Of course the blood of Baka is red like ours. But their blood is much more *chez les animaux*—close to the blood of animals. Among us Bangando, we say that the blood of Baka resembles the blood of animals, because they also behave like animals. I do not know if you already understand this. The Baka transform themselves into animals. When this one here leaves to go into the forest, he transforms himself. In the forest he eats what he wants, and when he comes back, he becomes a person again. The Baka say that the white people like them because they take their power [i.e., the white people gain the power and knowledge of the Baka through their interactions]. And they say that the Bangando don't know anything.[25]

In this story, the Bagando speaker begins by refuting the Baka claims by pointing out that the Bangando and Baka share the same blood and are thus equally human. But then he goes on the offensive, contending that Baka blood resembles that of animals (and also conveniently ignoring the fact that Bangando themselves say they can transform themselves into animals, notably elephants and leopards).[26] Typical of Bangando and Baka claims and counterclaims about who is human and who is an ape, this story expresses the teller's sense of his own people's intellectual, moral, and

political superiority over others, who are no better than apes. His words express the sense of self-righteousness on each side that characterized discussions of interethnic relations between the Bangando and Baka at the end of the twentieth century.

The story also suggests that Baka and Bangando people who coexist in the same villages and forests not only compete for forest and agricultural products and also for political and economic authority. In real life they were rivals for access to development aid in the form of health care and education projects, seasonal jobs with the safari hunting industry, occasional employment with conservation organizations, as well as the incidental but culturally significant "perks" of interactions with white people, such as media attention and tips from tourists. The Bangando man continued:

> You know, the Baka say that if a Baka dies, he transforms himself into a white person. And [they say that] if a Bangando dies, he transforms himself into a gorilla. All of this is because when a white comes, he directs himself to the Baka. He doesn't like anything but the Baka. When a white person spends a lot of time with a Baka, he [the Baka] says that it [the white person] is someone from his family who had died and has come back. And when he [the Baka] dies, he will also come back as a white person. When this white-Baka sees a Bangando then, he says: "Go away, Bangando. I am a white person." And after that, the white person [the reincarnated Baka] comes to ask for salt, but the Bangando cannot give it to him. The Baka will say that Bangando are gorillas, even though we share the same blood.[27]

The storyteller here invokes ape narratives to protest the preferential treatment the Baka have received at the hands of white missionaries, development agents, and conservation workers. Thus he repeats arrogant Baka claims that their own deceased return as white people who help their families and broader social networks while Bangando die and return as gorillas.

Several points are worth underscoring here. First, contemporary Bangando and Baka recognize that Euroamerican outsiders perceive Baka "pygmies" as isolated from modernity, exotically primitive, and therefore compelling recipients of their intellectual attentions, economic resources, conservation efforts, and social development campaigns. These outsiders tend to dismiss Bangando "villagers" as exploitative and lazy, devoid of any real social interest or value because, as modern-day peasants, they seem acculturated to and corrupted by the material accumulation that accompanies global capitalism. Second, outsiders' interventions invert the contemporary relations of authority between Bangando and Baka. Throughout southeastern Cameroon, Bangando generally occupy positions of greater political and economic power than their Baka neighbors, although in some dynamic situations Baka do subvert that authority. Outside aid workers, sensing but often overemphasizing the political and economic

marginalization of Baka, offer Baka preferential access to education and health care as a means of remedying these perceived imbalances, even as they contribute to longstanding Euroamerican fascinations and fantasies about "pygmies" as the embodiment of primitive human culture and humanity's primeval origins.[28] This tale thus expresses Bangando resentment about the contemporary inversion of the social order.[29]

Conclusion

The great ape tales explored here are rich, varied, and compelling narratives that express wide-ranging concerns in various central African societies. Tellers of these tales have linked them to crucial social, economic, and political relations. Particularly in the nineteenth century, these stories may have been one way of addressing conflicts over labor and access to various forms of wealth from an expanding trade with African and European traders. But such tales also commented on late colonial struggles over wealth in people and in material goods. The Mpiemu story from the late colonial period reflects on the gains and losses of Mpiemu engagements with a colonial political economy dominated by outsiders. More recently, Aka have used the tales to ridicule non-Aka, whom they see as part of a corrupt social hierarchy, while Bangando lament the social inversions that have accompanied unequally allocated development aid. Through attributions and accusations of gorilla-ness, some central Africans have deliberated on the differences between humanity and animality, self and other, the powerful and the marginalized, and life and death. And most recently, Central African and Cameroonian communities have—in strikingly divergent ways—argued over contemporary obligations among social groups and between people and animals, racial and ethnic relations, inversions of the social order, and access to material wealth and status.

Both the symbolic and material come together in these great ape tales. People have told these tales to debate distinctions between diverse social groups and to comment on their differential access to forest resources. But great apes are also potential meat; as the Tika Tika tale indicates, apes count among the game hunted—and at times protected—by certain social groups in the Sangha forests (Blom et al. 2004). Their symbolic and material importance thus endows great ape tales with valuable policy implications. These stories can provide wildlife conservationists with critical insights into why people hunt or choose to protect great apes (see Wilkie et al. 2005). And they can shed light on the complex social and political tensions generated by conservation interventions. Great ape tales are thus rich, complex narratives that offer conservationists a wealth of insights into both the promise and challenges of managing an important game population, as well as the potential social consequences of their interventions.

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Notes

1. On anthropological interpretations of people–animal relations, and particularly on the ways in which the "boundaries between human and animal are fluid, with animals thought of as persons (or capable of personhood), with humans thought capable of being reincarnated as animals and vice versa," see Mullin (1999). See also Willis (1990).
2. See Peterson (2003). On the Sangha basin, see Remis (1999), Goldsmith (1999), Parnell (2000), and Ruggiero (2000). Paul Richards's (1993, 1996a, 1996b) fascinating work on Mende conceptions of chimpanzees in Sierra Leone is the exception here.
3. Leopards, elephants, pangolins, and crocodiles have all held a central place in the practices and historical imaginations of equatorial Africans and Africanists, but not enough research has been conducted on great apes to determine whether they have gained similarly widespread importance. See, for instance, Douglas (1957) on African animals in general; on crocodiles, see Hunt (1999); on leopards, see Fabian (1996), Gray (2002), and Likaka (1997); on elephants,

see Joiris (1993). A more general discussion of animal transformations and their philosophical and psychological implications appears in Hegba (1998).

4. Another option, of course, would have been to examine how these primates understand human beings. (See Mullin 1999:201–24.)
5. "Disturbed" forests are those that have been extensively penetrated by commercial interests such as logging companies, resulting in rapidly growing secondary growth that often attracts apes because of newly diversified food sources. We recognize that forests have been shaped, and some argue managed, by centuries of human activities in the forests, as well as by animals such as elephants that can act as "bulldozer herbivores." See also Kortlandt (1984), quoted in Richards (1993:151).
6. Jennifer Dickenson's paper (2000) examines various nineteenth-century writers who "packaged and sold the gorilla for Western audiences in the years after the publication of *The Origin of Species*." Dickinson's paper alerted us to Kingsley's and Reade's discussions of gorillas.
7. For an articulation of this approach, see White (1995:219–20) and Fabian (2000:53). Although White's work on vampires has profoundly influenced our approach to these stories about great apes, it is important to signal the crucial differences between vampire and great ape stories. White establishes the generic quality of vampire stories, but it remains unclear to us how widespread great ape stories are, or whether they constitute a genre. White also uses her stories to write (and rewrite) colonial history, whereas there does not seem to be an overarching historical framework to which we can link great ape stories.
8. On other stories about the common origins of people and apes, see Giles-Vernick (2002:246), Laburthe-Tolra (1981:427), and Devisch (1992:76). In a somewhat different vein, Paul Richards (1996:144–45) observes that Mende people of Sierra Leone view chimpanzees as falling in an anomalous category of animals such as crocodiles and leopards that attack people without provocation.
9. The Bangando currently engage in the practice of meat distribution that appears in this story. Nephews (particularly maternal nephews, but also sometimes nieces) have special rights to the heads of animals killed by their uncles. We do not know whether young Mpiemu men also followed this practice, since Mpiemu informants only discussed the rights that fathers and mothers' brothers had to a young man's kills.
10. Eugenia Herbert (1993:165) has described hunting as a kind of paradoxical practice and set of beliefs, bound up with "power of life and death, creativity and destruction... accomplish[ed]... by [hunters']... ability to appropriate idioms and practices of death and fertility."
11. The critiques of du Chaillu are legion, but see Fernandez (1982:33–41) and Meyer (1992:43–56).
12. When tracking gorillas in the Sangha basin forest 1991, for instance, one Baka hunter, Bakembe, emitted what he later explained was a gorilla-in-distress call. The result was that a male gorilla charged and chased the group of people tracking him. The gorilla did not stop until Bakembe ceased his call.
13. We speculate that these central African stories provided the inspiration for the many King Kong films made since the early 1930s. Du Chaillu's work was widely read by an American public in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Meyer (1992) has argued that it powerfully shaped American percep-

tions of both Africa and gorillas and may have strongly influenced Burroughs's Tarzan stories. Du Chaillu's work was likely one source for the first (1933) "King Kong" film by Merian Cooper and Ernest Schoedsack. See du Chaillu ([1861] 1969:86), Meyer (1992:58–59, 61–62), and Browne (2006). We thank Jennifer Dickinson for alerting us to Meyer's argument.

14. A contemporary story among Aka peoples provides another twist on these abductions—that of apes attempting to live as human beings. Michelle Kisliuk (1998:207–8) recounts a tale in which a chimpanzee, Soumbou, tries to marry a woman. On the night of his wedding, he accidentally drinks oil instead of water, suffers a horrendous case of diarrhea that drives away his new wife, is attacked by biting ants, and is grossly humiliated. He retreats to the forest to live from then on as a chimpanzee.
15. Although the Atlantic slave trade never caused the widespread devastation in this part of Gabon that it did elsewhere in Africa, it profoundly affected forest peoples, particularly from the 1760s to the 1860s, when Africans expanded their contacts and trade with Europeans (Gray 2002:27–35; Vansina 1990: 197–207; Siroto 1969). Gardinier hypothesizes that the slave supply may well have been increased by Africans' efforts to tap into the new opportunities (Gardinier 1981:175–76). For a broad overview of this history, see Vansina (1990).
16. See also Laburthe-Tolra (1981:275–77) and Thomas, Bahuchet, and Epelbon (1993:221).
17. Giles-Vernick, interviews with Leon Antoinette (forest outside of Lindjombo, CAR, July 23, 1993); Alouba Clotere (Lindjombo, July 24, 1993); Ndoagne Micheline Lindjombo (November 4, 1993); Dinoramibali Martine (Lindjombo, November 8, 1993).
18. The project has received funding over the years from the World Wildlife Fund (U.S.), various agencies of the U.S. government, GTZ (Gesellschaft für technische Zusammenarbeit), the World Bank, and the Central African Ministry of Water and Forests. See also Wilkie and Carpenter (1999:340–46) for discussion of the role of safari hunting in central African forest conservation.
19. Ndjàmbé appears in myths and religious stories throughout western central Africa, generally representing an apical ancestor or primary deity. We wonder whether the Mpiemu deity Ntchambe, the Maka concept of *djambe* (an occult substance), and the Bangando ancestral/godlike figure Ndjàmbé are all refractions of broadly held western equatorial African notions of power, agency, and historical origins. For a discussion of djambe, see Geschiere (1995:26–60).
20. The "honey on every branch" seems to mean that there was a beehive on each branch.
21. Rupp, interview with Mokogwea (Mambélé, February 14, 1996).
22. Note that the chimpanzee's behavior in this narrative is strikingly different from what is supported by primatological research on chimpanzees, as well as Mende conceptions of them. Both primatologists and Mende recognize that chimpanzees can engage in all sorts of violent asocial behavior, such as cannibalism. See Richards (1996:149–51).
23. "Poachers" are defined here as nonlocal hunters who come to a particular region of the forest to hunt for the commercial bushmeat market.
24. The term *bilo* is a common epithet used by Aka "hunter-gatherers" generically to describe their non-Aka neighbors. This local stereotype is often glossed by external observers as "villagers" to contrast with the category "hunter-gather-

ers" or "pygmies." However, it is important to note that both Aka and non-Aka today live in villages of various kinds and pursue various means of subsistence, including hunting, trapping, fishing, farming, logging, and diamond mining, in various proportions. It is also important to note that *bilo* is a local stereotype rather than a self-ascribed marker of identity held by non-Aka peoples.

25. Rupp, interview with Angula (Mambélé, April 29, 1999).
26. Blood is both a physical substance and an idiom that serves to highlight similarities among members of the same species and members of a lineage. But highlighting sanguinal similarities and differences is also a means of distinguishing between different species, to undergird the boundaries between people and apes. This point echoes Willis's argument that "the animal symbol conveys two opposed sets of meanings, signifying both separation and continuity. . . ." The meanings that people invest in animals are part of a "world-making process that always and everywhere has the form of a continuing mediation between two juxtaposed domains or aspects of unitary reality" (Willis 1990:19–20).
27. Rupp, interview with Angula.
28. For further discussions of Euroamerican fascination with "pygmies," see Bahuchet (1993:153–81), Kisliuk (1998:146–48), Waehle (1999:5–6), and Frankland (1999:61–73). For broader reflections on Euramerican conceptions of (and quests for) the "pure" and the "primitive," see Torgovnik (1990).

    The fascination with so-called pygmy groups (Aka, Ngombe, and Baka) had its origins in the colonial period. The French colonial administrators viewed them with a mixture of fascination and admiration for their hunting prowess and disgust for their resolute mobility and refusal to live in clearly delineated villages. In contrast to their onerous demands upon other populations to pay taxes, to live in colonially designated villages, and to provide labor for colonial works projects, administrators took a more benign approach to their "pygmy" subjects. In the 1930s they exempted these subjects from taxes and residence in colonial villages and sought to "liberate" them from their "Bantu patrons." This differential treatment of "pygmies" was not lost on other Sangha basin inhabitants; in recent years, they have often perceived that development efforts have reproduced this imbalance of the colonial past. For further discussions of these colonial imbalances, see Giles-Vernick (1999:184) and Delobeau (1992:374–84).
29. It is particularly interesting that the request for and refusal of salt figures the new relationship between the groups of people. These relations between Baka, Bangando, and white outsiders have historical roots in French colonial rule. Salt was a substance that early colonial administrators and concessionary company agents used to cajole recalcitrant Africans to trade with and to work for them, and it is mentioned in many Sangha basin narratives about the early years of colonization. Salt as a symbolic commodity has a particularly powerful resonance in southeastern Cameroon, where many people had real difficulties acquiring it. Among kin group members, salt was the most commonly borrowed good, and it tended to flow from Bangando families (who have relatively more income to purchase it) to Baka (who seldom have as much income). Only on rare occasions do Bangando borrow salt from their Baka neighbors. In this narrative the Bangando man, by refusing the request for salt, subtly reminds the Baka that he is Baka, and not really "white."